

**Testimony before the  
U.S. - China Economic and Security Review Commission**

**Access to Information in the People's Republic of China**

**Panel II: July 31, 2007**

**Dan Southerland  
Vice President of Programming and Executive Editor  
Radio Free Asia  
Washington, D.C.**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Commission:

**Overview of RFA's Mission and Broadcasts**

Radio Free Asia (RFA) is a private, nonprofit corporation broadcasting news and information in 12 languages and dialects to listeners in Asia who lack access to free news media. RFA launched its first broadcast, in Mandarin Chinese, in September 1996. RFA aims to serve as a model substitute for local media, providing local news in countries that prohibit free speech. Funded through an annual grant distributed from the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), RFA's legislative mandate is to deliver accurate and timely news and information, and to provide a forum for a variety of opinions and voices.

RFA adheres to the highest standards of journalism and aims to exemplify accuracy, balance, and fairness in its editorial content. In addition to its news programming, RFA strives to be a "university of the air," broadcasting works of literature and nonfiction that have been banned in RFA's target countries. RFA also aims to give its listeners a vehicle to voice their thoughts, including when they disagree with RFA reporting, through numerous call-in programs—five in Mandarin, one in Cantonese, four in Tibetan, one in Uyghur, and one in Khmer. This interactive dialogue is augmented by our award-winning online presence, which comprises message boards, blogs and multimedia components contributed by citizen journalists on the ground inside China, which we post after they are authenticated by RFA editors.

RFA's Mandarin service broadcasts 12 hours a day to China. The Tibetan service broadcasts eight hours and the Cantonese and Uyghur services two hours each. These services incorporate reports from correspondents and stringers based in Hong Kong, Taipei, Seoul, Ankara, Katmandu, Central Asia, and Dharamsala, in northern India.

With a mandate that differs markedly from that of VOA, RFA does little reporting on regional and international news unless it has an impact in our target countries. Nor does RFA broadcast in English. Each language service is staffed entirely by native

speakers, and the programming of each service is distinctive, reflecting each market's individual requirements.

RFA focuses on tough issues missing from China's domestic media coverage. In just 10 years, we have established ourselves as an authoritative source for news on sensitive topics such as censorship, corruption, civil unrest, and human rights legal activism. When the Chinese People's Armed Police opened fire on villagers in southern China in December 2005, citizens on the scene phoned RFA to say "Listen – they're using real bullets!"

It is therefore hardly surprising that China would seek to interfere with RFA programming through electronic jamming of shortwave radio broadcasts, Web blocking, and the disruption of call-in shows.

RFA has no bureau inside China. RFA has no direct access to press conferences inside China. RFA does not have any sanctioned re-broadcasting or affiliates inside China.

### **Chinese Interference with RFA's Web site and Radio Broadcasts**

The Chinese authorities block our Web site by name, by key words, and by topics targeted for censorship on the Chinese Internet. They have disrupted some of the phone lines to our call-in programs with repeated calls, apparently computer-driven. Sometimes the lines simply go dead. They have tracked down some of our sources, interviewees, and repeat callers and harassed or persecuted them despite attempts by RFA to protect sources and callers on the air. Most callers know the danger and go through complicated machinations to escape detection and retaliation.

RFA broadcasts to China in Mandarin, Tibetan, and Uyghur are consistently jammed. Jamming is accomplished through a two-pronged approach using high-powered transmitters to jam broad areas of China and low-powered transmitters to target major cities. Former Communist Party Chief and President, Jiang Zemin personally directed a large-scale, broad-spectrum, and long-term build-up of aggressive censorship aimed specifically at the Tibetan and Uyghur people, including construction of new state-of-the-art jamming facilities and intensified official central news broadcasting in Uyghur and in three Tibetan dialects on television, shortwave radio and via satellite.

According to industry sources, a 2004 Chinese government purchase of 16 more high-powered transmitters from Thales, a French corporation, signaled China's plans to intensify its efforts. These new transmitters cost more than U.S. \$1.5 million each, but this was just a small part of the overall cost needed to operate, maintain, and manage such a large jamming network. A single transmitter used by RFA may attract a dozen small local jammers and one or two larger jammers working against it. The jamming often consists of Chinese funeral music, which incorporates the harsh sounds of Chinese horns, drums, and gongs—and sends Chinese listeners scrambling to change the frequency.

Despite all this effort, RFA continues to get through to a significant number of listeners in every province of China. Our call-in hosts have received calls from people of all ages—from eight to 99. The callers complain about the jamming, but many are able to hear us well enough to give feedback on our shows. But the police have issued warnings to repeat callers in a number of provinces. We know of at least a few who have been detained or fined for listening to RFA, with reports of this coming most frequently from -Tibetan areas. RFA received a report late last year that a Buddhist monk had been jailed, in part because he told poor Tibetan families to educate themselves by getting radios and listening to RFA broadcasts.

Many listeners call in to RFA from pay phones to avoid having their calls traced. In one case, a caller to the Cantonese Hotline from Guangxi Province said two policemen dragged him out of a phone booth and detained him for a month without charges, beat him, imposed a heavy fine, and warned him not to make any more calls to RFA. He told our Cantonese call-in host that he would continue to call. Earlier this year, a Mandarin caller told us he rode his bicycle for several miles to reach a pay phone booth in order to call RFA. He was afraid, he said, that he might be overheard at his university. Some callers have told us they have had to try upwards of 50 calls to get through to RFA. Some are reduced to tears upon finally reaching our call-in hosts. Such random interference and intimidation reveal both the tenacity of the Chinese authorities and the determination of our callers. A wave of sophisticated Chinese laws aim to control and force registration of internet identification letters and may require mobile phone subscribers to register their real names. These laws provide the authorities with the ability to trace all manner of communications including email, short messaging and internet use.

In addition to jamming our broadcasts and blocking of our Web site, China has applied pressure to several of its neighbors in order to dissuade them from allowing RFA to broadcast from their countries. In Thailand and the Philippines, large U.S. government transmitter sites cannot broadcast RFA programming because those countries refuse to allow it.

The Chinese government has also periodically sought to disrupt our call-in shows. Starting around July 20, 2004, Beijing began blocking caller access codes in northeast China and appeared to be bombarding our Mandarin Listener Hotline show with automated crank dial-ups. Callers complained about busy signals eight out of 10 times when seeking 800-number access. Another problem was Chinese operators who asked callers why they were trying to reach these numbers, and then claimed that RFA's toll-free lines were "non-working" numbers. But dedicated listeners have found ways to continue to reach host William Zhang. RFA's long-distance carrier has investigated these phenomena and advised that the source of the problem originated inside China.

There is no known technical solution that will solve RFA's jamming problem. Political pressure on China to halt the jamming would be the most effective means to stop it but repeated formal requests have yet to yield any improvement or even acknowledgement. A halt in jamming would save the BBG millions of dollars a year. Effectively

countering jamming would require more than double the number of transmitters now in use. The cheapest means to do this would be to obtain permission for RFA broadcasts from U.S. government sites in Thailand and the Philippines and gain access to some of the border country transmitters. But officials in both Thailand and the Philippines are sensitive to Chinese concerns.

Although RFA Web sites directed at China—in Mandarin, Cantonese, Tibetan, and Uyghur—are targets of aggressive Chinese blocking measures, our Web users are creative and determined to use proxy servers and other software countermeasures to reach us. We know that our news does get through via these ingenious users, individual blog and private Web site republications and “human proxies, who not only spread our news by word of mouth but also send mass e-mails of our reports and links. They re-post our reports on other Web sites and on blogs accessible inside China. Although it is impossible to measure with any degree of accuracy the multiplier effect of the republication and mass e-mailing of RFA material, we ourselves frequently get played back to us unedited news from RFA that is published by someone else as if it were their own product.

We recently discovered that a Web site inside China run by Tibetan students re-broadcasts RFA’s Tibetan call-in shows in their entirety. And Tibetan schools in exile distribute RFA Tibetan Web news to students to use as part of their daily reading materials.

RFA’s Uyghur Web site has now become the only non-Chinese Uyghur site that is updated continuously, in an Arabic-based font, and that provides accurate and balanced news coverage about events inside China. The site also functions as a collective memory for the Uyghurs’ besieged culture and language. The Uyghurs are a Muslim minority of some 10 million people living in China’s Xinjiang Autonomous Region, which encompasses roughly one-sixth of Chinese territory. Radio Free Asia has recently seen its Uyghur news proliferate on other Uyghur Web sites on a daily basis.

RFA is now entering a new era in which the Web no longer exists simply to amplify regular broadcasts. We have hired a first-rate Web team. We published our first blog in January 2006 during the tsunami crisis, when one of our Tibetan reporters in south India wrote what we believe at the time was the world’s first Tibetan-language blog. We have since introduced our first slide shows, and have begun attracting a younger audience through other interactive features. Finally, RFA is now offering a large place to citizen journalists who send us videos that would not otherwise reach many people seeking uncensored news in a restricted media environment.

### **RFA and Citizen Journalists**

The most significant new phenomenon is the advent and explosion of citizen journalists inside China. Nothing may frighten the Chinese government more than scores of citizens on the ground with cell phone cameras at the ready to capture and disseminate images from protests, demonstrations, and other events as they take place — and which

can be quickly recorded by anyone and everyone. Radio Free Asia is meanwhile expanding its multimedia content on its Web sites right alongside this movement.

### **Major Stories by RFA's China Services**

#### **Cantonese**

In early 2007, RFA's Cantonese service obtained and published online exclusive video of a major riot in Sichuan, in southwestern China, in which thousands of local residents converged on an upscale hotel, setting fire to the building to protest the death and alleged rape of a 16-year-old girl who worked there. This story was also picked up by major international media and signified the emergence of "citizen journalism" as a major phenomenon in China, in which ordinary citizens are increasingly recording, reporting, and publicizing news that China's official media are prohibited from covering. In 2007, RFA's Cantonese service broke news of major riots in Guangxi province over harsh population control policies, including forced abortions and heavy fines. Thousands of villagers set fires and smashed cars in Shabi Township. Some villagers gave varying accounts of injuries and deaths but the local government rejected these reports.

#### **Mandarin**

In December 2005, RFA's Mandarin service broke the story of a deadly police crackdown in the southern Chinese township of Dongzhou. China's official Xinhua news agency later reported that police had opened fire "in alarm" on protesters who attacked them with home-made explosives, killing at least three people. But villagers said police fired first on an unarmed crowd, and that the death toll was higher than official reports admitted. The story was picked up by hundreds of media outlets worldwide. Soon after the crackdown, which prompted a media blackout, an RFA reporter traveled to the scene, reporting that: "The closer you get to Dongzhou, the more signs there are....'Crack down on criminals. Maintain social stability. Do not believe rumors. Do not believe evil talk. ...Without the government, it will be hard to have peace. The government solidly supports the people of Dongzhou.'" RFA-Mandarin is widely republished in the international media when we break such stories, with dozens of prominent pickups every week.

#### **Uyghur**

In early 2007, RFA's Uyghur service broadcast an exclusive report – picked up by major media worldwide - on the secret execution in far-west Urumqi of an ethnic Uyghur man who allegedly attempted to "split the [Chinese] motherland." Semed, a Uyghur political activist deported to China from Pakistan in 2003, was sentenced to death Oct. 31, 2005, by the Urumqi City Intermediate People's Court for being "a splittist" and for "possessing firearms and explosives." RFA Uyghur has also reported exclusively and extensively on the continued practice of forced labor or *hasha* in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, under which ethnic Uyghurs are effectively conscripted to work without pay under official direction. In a series of interviews with RFA in 2004, Chinese government officials in Xinjiang confirmed that *hasha* still exists, although the system has long since been eliminated in other parts of China. More recently, the Uyghur service reported exclusively—and was credited as such at length by the London *Sunday Times*

—regarding the systematic confiscation of passports held by ethnic Uyghurs and ethnic Hui Muslims in a bid to stop them from making pilgrimages to Mecca.

### **Tibetan**

In 2006, members of a group of 43 Tibetans described their terrifying flight over the mountains to Nepal while under fire from Chinese border guards who took several dozen other Tibetans into custody. Witnesses said at least one person was killed and at least one wounded by the gunfire on Sept. 30, 2006, near the Himalayan pass at Nangpa La in the Mount Everest region. Others set the death toll higher. Another 36 or 37 Tibetans were detained, witnesses told the Tibetan service. In 2007,

Chinese police detained at least one person when several hundred Tibetans in Lhasa took part in an outlawed incense-burning there in a rare open display of opposition to Chinese rule. “About 500 Tibetans planned to participate in a huge incense-burning ritual at Kuru Bridge ...in response to the offering rituals for His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s long life, one source told the Tibetan service. RFA-Tibetan also broke the news this year of the detention of a group of Western tourists for staging a protest in Lhasa.

### **Topics the Chinese Government Attempts To Control**

As RFA’s Mandarin service director Jennifer Chou has written, when a new generation of Chinese leaders took power several years ago, “the world had high expectations.” The self-proclaimed “human-centered policies” of President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao led many in China to believe that the new leaders would introduce political reforms—or at least loosen controls over society and the media—to match China’s blazing economic growth.

In the West, many have long held the belief that, eventually, economic modernization would bring democratization. But early hopes for the Hu-Wen “new leadership” have so far proved to be “overly optimistic,” wrote Ms. Chou in a *Weekly Standard* article on how the Chinese authorities are targeting cyber-dissidents and journalists.

According to recent U.S. State Department human rights reports, the Chinese government has continued to threaten, arrest, and imprison many individuals for exercising free speech.

Just as was the case several years ago, the biggest taboo for journalists remains criticisms of senior leaders or reporting and opinions that directly challenge Communist Party rule.

According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), a Paris-based monitoring group, China currently imprisons more than 30 journalists, making the country the world’s leading jailor of journalists. In addition, more than 50 cyber-dissidents are under detention for posting messages or articles on the Internet that were considered.

Just this month, RSF reported that Li Xing, a young employee at a wedding photo shop was being held under police detention in Shandong Province after she took part in an online debate over the damage caused by the recent floods in China. She was accused of “broadcasting rumors about floods and creating an atmosphere of terror in the region.” The police refused to reveal the exact content of the woman’s posting. According to public security regulations, publishing false news that could disturb the public order and create panic is punishable with a prison sentence. The case seems to show that despite cautious legal changes in the area of natural disaster reporting, Chinese officials can still enforce strict censorship in a great variety of instances.

In fairness, let me report some improvements. Under Hu and Wen, the government has allowed more coverage of problems affecting ordinary citizens’ daily lives—problems outside the “most sensitive topics” zone. These topics that once were largely off-limits include, in some cases but not all, natural disasters, robberies, traffic accidents, coal-mine explosions, excessive agricultural taxes, social issues such as prostitution and gambling, and official corruption at medium-to-lower levels of the bureaucracy.

After playing down the threat of AIDS to China for many years, the Chinese government has encouraged more discussion of the subject. But the government and media still appear to be underestimating the total number of HIV/AIDS sufferers. Officials in Henan Province continue to block reporters attempting to investigate cases of hundreds of thousands of poor farmers who are believed to have been infected with the HIV virus after selling their blood under a program approved by the provincial government.

While the coverage of such topics has expanded, the central government still imposes limits. In many cases, such as the coverage of coal mine explosions, the media are advised to carry the official Xinhua News Agency version of events. Xinhua tends to play down the seriousness of negative events and attribute the causes to unworthy or corrupt individuals but not to the system itself. As an RFA broadcaster said recently, the Xinhua stories are confusing at times. “You do see partial truths and facts, but not ... the whole picture,” he said.

Part of that complete picture is the suffering of individuals involved. Take, for example, the thousands of Chinese coal miners who have died in a series of coal mine disasters over the last few years. Their stories and those of their families are rarely brought into full view.

### **Topics that remain under strict control**

**High-level corruption:** Such corruption is rarely covered unless it involves an official who has fallen from favor with the top leaders. The media rarely investigate such cases unless the authorities are already pursuing them.

**Unrest among farmers and workers:** Premier Wen has focused on the growing income gap between China’s city dwellers and many of the 800 million people still

living in the countryside, the majority of whom is still quite poor. Increasing rural income has been made a top priority. This has led to more coverage of excessive agricultural taxes and the low prices of agricultural products. The problems of migrant workers who seek work in the cities have also drawn more coverage. But coverage of protests, demonstrations, and riots by workers and farmers that are occurring by the tens of thousands each year, all over the country, go largely unreported. The Hu-Wen team clearly fears that coverage of this unrest could affect “stability.”

**Petitioners:** The police regularly round up and detain petitioners, including workers and farmers, who come from around the country to protest against abuses of power—an obvious story, but one that the state media cover up.

**Religion:** Coverage of religious groups not recognized by the government is banned. The state has arrested and persecuted numerous members of the Falun Gong spiritual movement in recent years, but no coverage of the movement’s own views or complaints is allowed. Underground Catholic and Protestant church members are not free to be quoted and the obvious growth in the numbers of Chinese Christians in recent years is not considered a story. The police have arrested many “house church” leaders, but news about this is banned.

**History:** It has been said that only the future is predictable in Communist-led countries. The past is unpredictable, because history can be rewritten under the guidance of the party. Off-limit subjects include Mao Zedong’s and other top party leaders’ responsibility for millions of deaths caused by the Great Leap Forward and subsequent famine and the Great Cultural Revolution. The real story of the crackdown and shootings of demonstrators near Tiananmen Square in 1989 is, of course, still on the government’s taboo list.

### **The most sensitive topics**

**The top leadership:** Any discussion of ups and downs and power struggles within the top leadership is taboo. Zhao Yan, a *New York Times* researcher in Beijing, was arrested -for allegedly leaking the news that Jiang Zemin would be resigning as head of China’s powerful military commission. The *Times* denied the allegation.

**Dissidents:** Under Hu Jintao, the government has so far been more strictly monitoring and controlling dissidents and independent-minded intellectuals than it did under Hu’s predecessor, Jiang Zemin. A few dissidents have been allowed to visit Hong Kong

**Ethnic minorities:** No coverage is allowed of tension and conflicts between ethnic minorities and Han Chinese.

**Foreign affairs:** No coverage is allowed of foreign countries’ criticism of China’s human rights problems or of its sales of military technology overseas. There is no coverage of what is really happening in Taiwan.



The official line in China is that ordinary Chinese care about practical issues—food, housing, and their day-to-day struggle to make a living, and not about political issues. But the outpouring of varying views on politics evidenced by calls to RFA from inside China, suggests the contrary. RFA callers, while not necessarily representative of the country as a whole, do care deeply about politically sensitive issues.

### **Methods the Chinese Government Uses To Control the Flow of Information**

The Chinese government has fired a number of top editors who were testing the limits and pursuing investigative journalism that offended the authorities. The best examples of this could be seen over the last several years in the city of Guangzhou, where the news media have long been considered the most open in China. Altogether at least seven leading editors were ousted and some jailed. Party or government propaganda specialists took over key positions. Liang Guobiao, the new head of *The Yangcheng Evening News*, one of the leading newspapers in Guangzhou, has no journalism experience, according to journalists who work at the paper.

Guangzhou's popular tabloid, *Nanfang Dushi Bao*, or *Southern Metropolis Daily*, had been the first to break the SARS story in early 2003. This kind of coverage embarrassed Guangzhou officials and police. Two of the paper's executives were arrested on charges of "embezzlement" and sentenced to terms of 11 and 13 years in prison. The newspaper's editor-in-chief was arrested and held in jail for five months. Unfortunately these censorship stories are all too common today in China.

Partly as a result of periodic crackdowns, self-censorship has become widespread among editors and reporters practicing all forms of journalism, including online journalism.

Meanwhile, since I testified before this commission in April 2005, Chinese government control of the media has intensified in less overt but in evermore subtle and sophisticated ways. Color and variety—form over content—are allowed. Once-taboo subjects such as sex can be discussed. Television has adopted more attractive packaging.

But what we are seeing is not better journalism. It is what *The Wall Street Journal* once described as "new and improved propaganda." Hard-hitting investigative journalism remains off-limits, except in certain isolated local situations where the authorities sometimes have trouble catching up. The kind of journalism that examines the entire system is off limits, thus depriving the Chinese people of the information they need to make up their own minds about how they are governed and led.

###